


 The TD-8KV: never before have electronic drum kits sounded or looked this good. With a wealth of realistic and 'oddball' effects, electronic kits are challenging and, in some areas, surpassing their acoustic cousins.



Convincing drummers that you can have an authentic experience with an electronic drum kit isn't easy. Here's one drummer's story of how he made the transition with the help of the TD-8KV.

Words: Paul White

Before taking up guitar, I used to be a drummer. I played drums in bands throughout my school years and made the switch because I used to build fuzz boxes and treble boosters for the guitarists in my band – and I had to play to test them. Well, that and the fact that if you played guitar, you could stand nearer the front where the girls could see you.

Even though I switched to guitar, I still dabbled with drums when I was studying electronics and after first hearing a drum machine (one of those wood veneered things that sounded like a goat sneezing into a sheet of baking foil), I came up with the idea that you could trigger those same sounds from pads rather than have them electronically sequenced. I told other musically minded students but they rubbished my idea and said that nothing like that could ever do the job of a 'proper' drum kit. Imagine my surprise when, around 1968, I saw the Moody Blues on TV using electronic drum pads. The contraption was about the size of a launderette and sounded about as good, but at least someone was doing what everyone had said would never work. A few years later, Dave Simmons came up with the idea for his 'Eastenders' electronic drum kit and the rest is history – but history has progressed since then.

Room to breath

Alongside my job as editor of *Sound On Sound*, I also run a studio where I take in just enough work to keep my hand in. The main purpose is to review gear in a typical studio environment but I've always been somewhat frustrated at not having quite enough space to record acoustic drums properly – you need space to let the sound breath.

I've come across many modern electronic drum kits over the years and I've even bought some of them but, until now, they've never sounded good enough to replace a real kit. This changed when I first heard a V-Drum kit. Of course, it was expensive but, as is the way of the world, the technology started to percolate downwards and, when the TD-8KV kit appeared, my interest in electronic drums was reactivated.

What I needed for my studio was a kit that real drummers would accept and that would sound acceptably realistic in the context of a typical mix. The old rubber pads had all the feel of hot water bottles filled with sand, and though the new rubber pads designed for the Roland TD-6 kit felt much better, I was won over by the idea of mesh heads. I had to have a TD-8KV and that was that.

A drummer's dream

Setting up proved to be very straightforward and once tuned, the mesh heads do feel much like real drums. The main difference is that the rubber-coated drum rims don't reduce your drum sticks to a bundle of splinters. The fact that you can get such a monstrous sound from headphones without driving the rest of the household mad is a ►

The real world

▷ drummer's dream. However, the real surprise was just how responsive the kick drum pad felt – I clamped on an old chain drive pedal and instantly it felt right. The kit has rubber tipped spurs fixed to the kick pad and you can screw back the rubber tips to reveal points. The rubbers won't stop the drum wandering but if you expose the spikes and set up the kit on a decent square of carpet off-cut, it's as solid as a rock.

Mesh heads are one thing but surely those thick, rubbery cymbals will feel wrong? Well, they do until you switch on the kit and get the cymbal sounds in your headphones, then as if by magic, they take on the characteristics of the real thing – they even move like cymbals. On the TD-8, there are only two sounds per cymbal – bell and bow on the ride cymbal and bow and edge on the crash – which works surprisingly well if you choose the right ride sound. It also never fails to impress when you grab the edge of a cymbal and damp the sound.

Hi-hat feel isn't a problem

The hi-hat on my TD-8KV kit is a simple rubber pad used in combination with a pedal but once you hear the right sounds coming back at you, the feel isn't a problem. There's a nice progressive change in decay as the pedal is opened and in addition to a hi-hat closing sound, there's also the sound of a pedal being closed and then quickly opened again.

One of my big gripes with drum machines and early electronic drum kits is that tom-fills sound like somebody machine-gunning a suitcase with every hit sounding identical. Because the TD-8 uses modelling, that doesn't seem to happen and in the main, even fast tom-fills sound as though they've been played on acoustic drums. Essentially, modelling means that instead of using samples, the drums use mathematical models of heads, shells and dampers that can respond very much like real drums. When editing sounds, you can do things like change shell materials, shell depth, head type, damping and even snare tension, all via a kid-simple user interface that's based on graphical icons.

It depends how hard you hit it

There's a useful degree of dynamic response, including the way the pitch of a tom bends depending on how hard you hit it. While an acoustic kit can only produce a limited range of sounds, the TD-8 handles everything from jazz to heavy rock, and that's before you get onto the electronic drum sounds and those additional noises that I call 'gimmicky stuff'. I particularly like the toms used in the heavy rock kit, ▷



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The TD-8's snare can provide position-dependent information on some patches that allow the sound to change in subtle ways as you move across the head. There's also a brilliant rim-shot function that, like any other pad, can be assigned to any sound you choose. It's probably fair to say that heard in isolation, an acoustic snare drum sounds a bit different to a TD-8 hit. But when you compare the TD-8 snare sound to that produced by a drum kit in a studio, then equalised and compressed to sound good, the differences are surprisingly small – better than a kit in a small room. And the kick drum – I've known engineers spend three days in the studio just trying to get a kick sound like the TD-8.

Aside from providing a pretty good stand-in for a traditional kit, the TD-8 also includes a wealth of oddball sounds and effects, some of which can be used to build your own drum loops or the foundations for a song idea. I don't use these much but they are there as is the in-built GM synth and sequencer. I probably wouldn't use drum triggered orchestra stabs or guitar power-chord samples while recording, but pull these out at a live gig and just watch the jaws drop. You can even play the kit with brushes if you have the right patches – and it sounds authentic.

Life is too short to record serious songs into a small hardware sequencer like this but the built-in musical patterns and songs are a different matter as they provide you with something solid to practise with. There's also a stereo input at the back of the TD-8 which is ideal for connecting a CD player so that you can play along to songs.

Recording with the TD-8KV

The fact that you can DI the TD-8 and then record it in the same room as other players without suffering huge amounts of spill, is a bonus for studio work. However, for serious work I have to say that I still prefer to mic up a traditional hi-hat and probably at least one ride cymbal as the shades of timbre you can get from real cymbals help to make the rest of the kit sound even more real. Even in a small studio this is quite practical as cymbals don't present a great sound-proofing problem compared to drums and, because the mesh heads are so quiet, you can record the cymbals at the same time as you play the kit and get perfectly acceptable results. Indeed it's quite OK to have the kit in the control room along with electric guitars and basses DI'd via modelling systems such as the VG-88. So even if you only have a small vocal booth, it's still relatively easy to make high-quality recordings.

One feature of the TD-8 that I have found particularly useful is the stereo aux input because in the studio you can feed this from one of the mixing console's pre-fade aux sends to provide the drummer with a stereo foldback mix in their headphones. This can be controlled on the TD-8 itself so there's no excuse for the drummer not to get a perfect balance of track and kit.

Reverb the usual way

When it comes to processing the sounds to get a big production effect, the unit has a more-than-respectable reverb section. Nevertheless, if you have some top-flight studio reverb that you'd prefer to use instead, it's a simple matter to route the kick drum to one of the direct outputs to keep it separate so that you can feed the kit into a mixer and then apply reverb there in the usual way.

I've found that many drummers (me included) find it difficult to keep time to click tracks and my theory is that this happens because you're playing directly over the clicks so you can't hear them. As soon as you can hear the clicks, it means you've already gone out of time. It's far easier to program a simple guide drum part into a sequencer and then play along to that. Another bonus of using the TD-8 is that I can record the MIDI output of the TD-8 into my sequencer, then fix any timing problems later. Not only that, but I can change the drum kit retrospectively if it doesn't suit the song.

If you're still thinking of electronic drum kits in terms of what you experienced ten years ago, now's the time to update your conceptions – it really is an entirely new ball game.

IT'S JUST A THOUGHT

Drumming helps keep you very fit. Not only is a session on a TD-8 a good deal more fun than a session in the gym, it's also a lot more creative.